



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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July 9, 2018

Dear English Department Alumni,

Thank you for expressing your concerns about the situation in the English Department. I value your input and welcome this opportunity to tell you about the policies we have in place, the steps we have taken, and our plans for the future.

TRANSPARENCY:

I understand and share your desire for transparency and have sought to be as open as possible in addressing this distressing situation. But my position as a representative of the University imposes legal restrictions that have made this process difficult to negotiate. In Texas, the release of confidential information is a crime. I am not allowed to speak on the record about the substance of the investigation, the Report, or the penalties, even though some of this information is circulating on social media and email, often in distorted forms.

From a distance this may seem like deliberate obfuscation, or even dismissiveness, but I hope you will understand that these constraints frustrate me as much as they do you. I care deeply about the Department to which I have devoted the last eleven years of my life as Chair, and the welfare of its graduate students has always been one of my main priorities. The question of departmental climate has occupied most of my attention this year. Please know that I would prefer to speak more freely than the law allows.

PROCESS AND POLICIES:

We are not legally allowed to deviate from the official policies and procedures established by the University in accordance with Title Nine and updated in 2017. They offer reporting options that are, quite deliberately, external to the department itself, and therefore safer than an internal process. Anyone who brings a problem to the Chair, the Graduate Adviser, or to any other faculty member or graduate student representative, will be directed towards these resources, which include a variety of offices and avenues for support. We are all mandatory reporters and are required to refer cases of harassment or misconduct to the Office for Inclusion and Equity (OIE).

In October 2017, I sent an email to the graduate students reiterating the department's condemnation of all forms of sexual abuse and misconduct and posted this statement on the main page of the department website, with a link to the OIE website.

<https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/english/>

Although information about how to report safely is on the OIE page, it is long and complex. I sent another email to the graduate students summarizing their options, and posted simpler reporting information and resources on our website, which is regularly updated:

<https://utexas.app.box.com/v/GraduateStudentResources/folder/42134497274>

BACKGROUND and ACTIONS TAKEN:

When the article at issue appeared in October 2017, I contacted OIE. I then had to decide whether to call our current graduate students together despite the legal limitations on what I could say, or remain silent as the UT lawyers would have preferred. Against their advice I attempted to run a meeting at which I could talk only about procedure, rather than appear to be dismissing the issue or hiding my head in the sand. The meeting was, I admit, a failure. Students naturally wanted to address substance; I could talk only about policy. Students were confused, upset, and in need of reassurance, which I failed to give. Worse, in describing the extensive new 2017 policies, I used the word “draconian,” which has haunted me ever since. I did not mean to imply that the policies were wrong, only that they were much more restrictive than the ones obtaining in 2011. But I was flustered by the level of distrust in the room and handled the situation clumsily.

While I regret that this was not a more auspicious beginning, once that early meeting made clear to me the extent of the breach of trust between faculty and graduate students, I and other faculty leaders have sought to be decisive and proactive in repairing the damage. I met with the co-Chair of the Graduate Student Steering Committee, who helped to clarify the student perspective, and who communicated to the students in a letter my regret about my handling of the meeting. I called a general faculty meeting to discuss the issue and formed an ad hoc email group of concerned colleagues to advise me; I also brought the issue to our Executive Committee.

Professor Jim Cox called a meeting of the Graduate Programs Committee in which faculty heard three graduate student representatives describe the problems with departmental climate, and the lack of trust between faculty and students. Many faculty members, including me, held discussions with their own graduate students, and in graduate classes. In response to all this input, we asked the students to form a student-led Task Force on Departmental Climate, and four faculty members agreed to join them. We were told the investigation would be over before Christmas and hoped that the Task Force would be ready to help navigate what we anticipated would be its complex aftermath.

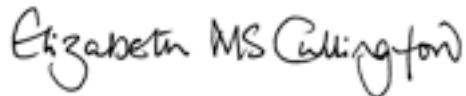
Meanwhile, the Task Force addressed a range of issues of concern to graduate students, involving such things as funding, course allocations, milestones, and extensions. The Graduate Adviser, Professor Gretchen Murphy, and I responded to all their questions in a long document. We also met with the first and second year cohorts separately to address their specific concerns.

Late in the spring semester, when it became apparent that the Investigation was not going to conclude until after term ended, I held a faculty meeting to discuss the ongoing issue of climate, and brainstorm about strategies for addressing the issue in the Fall. I then called a meeting with the graduate students, to which faculty were also invited: many came. We made some genuine progress in that meeting towards understanding each other, and the restoration of confidence and trust. We agreed to meet again in the Fall. At the end of the semester the Climate Task Force presented to the Graduate Studies Committee an interim report that focused on transparency and communication.

The conclusion of the investigation in late May was inevitably unsatisfying because FERPA and other confidentiality requirements kept the Report and penalties out of the public domain. The *Splinter* article, which contained little information from official sources (since I could not comment), was the immediate context for your letter to us.

Spurred by the investigation, we are intently focused on departmental climate and are working on ways to improve communication, mentorship, and policies relating to graduate students. I recently met with the coordinator of the Task Force, who says that their final report will arrive later in the summer: I will be happy to share it with you. We obviously have much work to do in the Fall.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Elizabeth MS Cullingford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Elizabeth Cullingford
Chair, Department of English
Jane Weinert Blumberg Chair in English
University Distinguished Teaching Professor